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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON FORMER PRIME MINISTER CHUAN LEEKPAI

REF: (A) BANGKOK 1578 (B) BANGKOK 0948

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH L. BOYCE. REASON: 1.4 (D)

1. (C) Summary: During a March 8 meeting with the Ambassador, former Prime Minister and Democrat Party (DP) leader Chuan Leekpai said that Prime Minister Thaksin did not understand the problems in southern Thailand and indeed his policies were exacerbating the situation. Chuan feared that if Thaksin's hard-line policies in the region continue, international terrorist organizations such as the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or al-Qaeda could be tempted to take advantage of the situation. Chuan described the recent general elections as the dirtiest he had seen in his political career and accused the Thaksin administration of using troops and provincial government officials to interfere in the voting. Chuan described Thaksin as a formidable politician who uses his control over much of the media to extend his political power. End Summary.

#### CHUAN CONCERNED OVER SITUATION IN THAILAND'S DEEP SOUTH

2. (C) During a March 8 meeting with the Ambassador, former Prime Minister and Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai said that Thaksin's policies are exacerbating the situation in the southern Muslim majority provinces bordering Malaysia. To Chuan, the Government does not appear to be interested in solving the real problem, but variously blames the violence on drugs, criminal gangs and separatists. Thaksin's approach was superficial and frivolous, he said. The Thai Rak Thai's (TRT) massive electoral loss in the southern border provinces demonstrated the populace's rejection of his policies. "They saw the video of the security forces actions at Tak Bai," Chuan said.

3. (C) According to Chuan, when the military was initially in charge of security in the region during the tenure of the Southern Border Provinces Center and the Civilian-Police-Military Task Force 43, things were relatively peaceful. With Thaksin's disbanding of those structures and the ascendancy of the police in these "special areas," the situation deteriorated. Muslim feelings of alienation increased.

4. (C) The Ambassador noted that the Indonesian Government had a policy of recruiting police from local villages. Thai officials, on the other hand, have maintained that most Thai Muslims in the southern region who take the written test fail because of inadequate education from the "pondok" (Islamic school) system. This results in a police force that is from the outside and does not understand local culture and customs. The Ambassador added that Thaksin seemed insensitive to Thai Muslim feelings by initially blaming the suffocation deaths at Tak Bai on the weakness of arrested protesters from Ramadan fasting.

#### SAYS THAKSIN ALIENATING MUSLIM NEIGHBORS

5. (C) Chuan said that he was concerned that if Thaksin's hard-line policies continue, international terrorist organizations such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or al-Qaeda could be tempted to try to take advantage of the situation created by the conflict. He criticized Thaksin's accusations that neighboring countries Malaysia and Indonesia are sites for training separatists. This is not the policy of these countries and all Thaksin succeeds in doing is to anger them, Chuan said. Chuan noted that Thaksin did not call Prime Minister Badawi to discuss a suspected separatist held by the Malaysian authorities but instead talked to the press about wanting the prisoner turned over to Thailand. There are complicated ties involved between Muslims living in southern Thailand and in Malaysia, he continued. Malaysia and Indonesia are majority Muslim countries and their people feel for their fellow Muslims in southern Thailand when they see films of Tak Bai. Chuan also expressed concern that Muslim religious schools, by not concentrating on teaching marketable skills, are producing graduates with poor employment prospects who could turn to violence in frustration. Chuan said that the southern Thailand region needs investment in education and industry. He noted the earlier success of "growth triangles" in the region and

suggested that an Indonesia/Malaysia/South Thailand triangle with complementary factory and industrial production would energize the region's economy.

16. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that in Indonesia, religious schools in 99 percent of the cases are moderate, almost secular in tone and include mainstream subjects in their curriculum. He noted that in the three Thai provinces Sharia law governs issues such as birth, death, marriage and divorce. Religion and country should be able to coexist, he said, and all could be made to feel Thai and not singled out as different.

#### RECENT ELECTION "DIRTIEST" YET

17. (C) Turning to party politics, the Ambassador asked about the recent elections in which the Democrat Party (DP) was massively defeated by Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party. Chuan responded that election was the dirtiest he had seen in his political career. He accused the Thaksin administration of using the bureaucracy to influence the voting. He said that provincial governors and police had interfered in the election process and that soldiers were used to vote in early elections in attempts to unseat DP candidates.

18. (C) Chuan specifically noted as an example the election campaign fought by prominent DP MP (and former foreign minister) Surin Pitsuwan in Nakorn Sri Thammarat. Surin fought a tough race against his TRT challenger. Fortunately, Chuan said, Surin collected enough support to overcome the thousands of votes by troops bussed in by the government to vote for the TRT candidate in early voting, a misuse of a procedure that allows voters unable to get to the polls on election day (such as soldiers on duty) to cast ballots beforehand (Bangkok 0948). Chuan said that the use of army and police personnel to interfere in the election was indicative of increasing control in general by Thaksin. He said that Thaksin controls virtually all of the media, including television stations such as ITV and UBC. The Prime Minister has a strong sense of public relations style and will continue to use his control over the media for his own political ends, he predicted.

#### ABHISIT HAS WORK CUT OUT FOR HIM

19. (C) Following the DP's loss and Banyat Bantadtan's resignation, it is now Abhisit Vejjajiva's turn as the party's leader, Chuan said. The DP would have lost by less if Abhisit had been leader at the time of the election. Banyat was a straight talker but he couldn't compete with the populist message of Thaksin. Abhisit will have to do a better job inspiring the voters in his speeches.

#### BURMA

10. (C) The Ambassador noted the unpopularity of Thaksin's Burma policy in the United States. He pointed to sharp reaction to Thaksin's recent reported characterization of Than Shwe's rationale for Aung San Suu Kyi's continued detention as "reasonable." Even if the remarks were quoted out of context, the widespread impression is that Thaksin is acting as an apologist for the Burmese regime and his engagement policy is helping it to hold onto power.

11. (C) Chuan responded that as Prime Minister he never visited Burma under the military regime. He didn't want to demonstrate any form of support or sense of legitimacy to the regime. He did meet Than Shwe in Chiang Rai to discuss counter-narcotics and border security issues. Than Shwe promised to cooperate on those issues. Chuan recalled that he had used the army to clamp down on violence along the border. He described Than Shwe as a "religious" man who told Chuan that he hoped one day to visit the Buddhist temples of Thailand.

12. (C) The Ambassador said that ASEAN should play a more assertive role on the Burma issue. Next year, Burma will have the Chair of ASEAN and that is a problem. The Ambassador cited as "encouraging" the recent efforts by the Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Committee, made up of parliamentarians from some of the ASEAN member countries, to quietly address this issue (see Bangkok 1578).

#### CAUTIOUS RESPONSE ON FTA

13. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question regarding a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the U.S., Chuan said that he supports it, but with reservations. He noted that Thailand's FTA with China was "not to our advantage." He said that unfortunately in trade, "one party prospers more than the other." The biggest challenge is to figure out how to adjust to the market changes that come about from free trade patterns, and how to cushion the effects as industries have to restructure in the face of competition. This is difficult to explain to the public, he concluded.

